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Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
27 February-9 March 2012
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Rural Development Leadership Network, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Of the approximately 3.4 billion women in the world, more than 500 million are poor rural women. Of those poor rural women, about 4.2 million live in the United States of America.

Some of the poor rural women in the United States work on small farms or as farmworkers for corporate farmers. Their income is increasingly from non-farm sources. However, employers are increasingly closing plants and laying people off during the great recession. A disproportionate number of families in persistently poor rural areas in the United States are people of colour or from otherwise historically oppressed groups. New economic options are comparatively limited because the Internet is not widely available. Access to health and mental health care is often inadequate because of distance to providers. Public transportation is rarely available. Rural women are especially vulnerable to domestic violence because of their economic and social status and comparative isolation. Educational attainment among rural women is lower than among the general population. As in developing countries, self-employment and microenterprise appear to provide a path to greater self-sufficiency.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognizes the extent of poverty in the developing world and in poverty-stricken areas in developed countries. It states that poverty among women is directly related to the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance, and to education and support services as well as their minimal participation in the decision-making process. Poverty can also force women into situations in which they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

It also notes the disproportionate burdens that rural women bear. Because of their distance from centres of power, media, money and influence, the concerns of rural women are often not included on the agendas of decision-making bodies. The priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women is a positive step towards recognizing the concerns of poor rural women worldwide.

In order to fulfil the potential of the theme and to meet the Commission's recommendation that women be represented in the decision-making bodies that affect them, it is important that more poor rural women, including women from poverty-stricken areas in developed countries, be present at the fifty-sixth session and at future sessions. The professional and academic women who predominate at meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women perform important work as allies of the poor. But the empowerment of poor rural women will be realized more fully when they have a seat at the table. Their role in poverty and hunger eradication will be enhanced. Their recommendations for development and current challenges will be heard. They are leaders in their communities and deserve the same chance as others to meet with peers from around the world, share experiences and strategies and advocate for themselves and the causes they believe in. We recommend that Member States, voluntary groups and non-governmental organizations working with the United Nations make this possible by giving financial support to poor rural women from their countries so that they may participate in sessions of the Commission.

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: International Public Policy Institute and Niger Delta Women's Movement for Peace and Development.